

Is it time to think about...

Procrastination?

To borrow from William James, “Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task.” However, some supervisors and managers may more readily attribute an employee’s struggle with procrastination to a quote from jazz soloist Jimmy Lyons, “Tomorrow is the only day in the year that appeals to a lazy man.” Unfortunately, that’s the problem with procrastination. Through a general misunderstanding of human nature, the word itself has become a synonym for laziness. But if you assume that procrastination is simply a result of being lazy, you’re likely to be miles away from solving the problem.

What causes procrastination?

Lenora M. Yuen, PhD., psychologist and coauthor of *Procrastination*:

Wh You Do It What to Do About It, believes that there are really two causes of procrastination: fear and low self-esteem. Dr. Yuen contends that when people have a low sense of self-esteem, they look at the work they produce as a constant gauge of their own worth. They don’t worry about making mistakes because it might get them in trouble with the boss. They worry because any mistake they make means that they have failed as a person. Consequently, they don’t take that risk. They put things off. They procrastinate.

Say, for instance, that you delegated a project to someone who worries a lot about his or her self-esteem. This person tried their best, but unfortunately when the project concluded, it didn’t get the rave reviews they had hoped for. For this person, the result was, “Well, I obviously tried my best and my best wasn’t good enough. So, I must not be good enough either.” And he or she files that memory away.

Now, fast-forward to a new day when you must delegate another project to this person. He or she remembers what happened the last time and instinctively falls back on their defense mechanism – procrastination. The person puts the project off until the last minute and then makes a “last ditch” effort to get the project done in whatever time is left. Now, regardless of the outcome, the person can say, “This was not a true test of my ability. If I had more time, the outcome would have been different.”



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According to Dr. Yuen, “Procrastination is a built-in safeguard that never allows the person’s full potential to be put to any kind of critical test. It allows a person to preserve an illusion of brilliance without ever having the illusion destroyed by reality.”

Another possible explanation of procrastination is the fear of success. A big paycheck is nice, but for some, the added responsibility that can come with it just isn’t worth it. Similarly, the additional responsibility of continually “topping” what you did so successfully last week can also cause some people to throw up their hands and say, “Where does it end?”

Fearing that they may eventually run out of gas on their journey, they decide it would be better to put off the trip.

Often, these fears are a result of someone’s desire to be perfect. And the need to be perfect, again according to Dr. Yuen, can be attributed to self-esteem issues. Society refers to these people as perfectionists. We all know them. And sometimes we know them as well as we know ourselves. Perfectionists spend a lot of time trying to make sure that there is no room for error, or criticism in their work. Unfortunately, they spend so much time on the minor details that they usually end up far behind schedule.

Certainly, the list of reasons people procrastinate, all connected to issues of fear or self-esteem, can be lengthy.

Many times, procrastination is the result of undefined project expectations. If a project is poorly explained, or not fully thought out before it is delegated, many employees won’t ask for more information because they *fear* looking stupid. Consequently, the vagueness of the project results in an unwillingness to get started for *fear* that it will be done wrong. To put it another way, if an employee hears, “I’m not sure what I want, but I’ll know it when I see it” from their supervisor, he or she isn’t likely to get in a big hurry to do much of anything.

Procrastination can be a form of rebellion too. People who fear or resent being micro-managed by their organization or their supervisor will try to recapture some of their self-esteem or “power” by deciding for themselves when an assignment will be completed.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult for any supervisor to know when an employee is doing this on purpose because of so many variables in the work process.

A problem to solve, not a person to fix

Of course, even though procrastination can be the result of many different factors, supervisors and managers can't overlook the fact that, at least sometimes, an employee just doesn't want to do the job. As Dr. Yuen points out, "While it all looks the same on the surface, the underlying reasons for procrastination can be numerous." So how do you know when to treat procrastination as a redirecting issue, and when to do some detective work to determine the real cause?

Dr. Yuen suggests that a good place to start is to look at the employee's work history. If procrastination is part of an ongoing pattern, then disinterest in the job is a definite possibility. However, if the employee's work history indicates that he or she has always been productive and has only recently exhibited signs of procrastination, you should probably dig a little deeper.

Ask yourself what changes the employee has recently gone through. Is the employee in a new job? Has the employee taken on new work responsibilities? Has the employee been dealing with a change in his or her personal life such as a divorce, illness or death? Any of these factors and many others could be the root cause of procrastination. If you suspect there is more to learn, speak to their employee about the problem and work together with him or her to solve it.



While procrastination can stem from many factors outside the supervisor's control, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to prevent it from occurring. Often, there are some simple steps that can be taken.

1. Establish clear-cut goals and priorities immediately. Begin by establishing an ultimate deadline. Next, determine priorities. However, instead of determining what all the priorities in the project are, determine what the most important priority is first. Then, move to the next important and so on. Doing this helps to create a linear progression of priorities that is easy to follow. Then, set mini-deadlines for each priority. Work out the whole schedule in such a way that by meeting various deadlines, everyone involved will have enough time to give the most important parts of the project the attention they need without missing the final deadline.

2. Work together with employees to establish goals.

Before the project begins, make sure a consensus is reached concerning the work schedule. This will help avoid any feeling of being micro-managed, which can lead to procrastination. As much as possible, let everyone involved have a say in the matter. If disagreements over timelines arise, try to reach an acceptable compromise.

3. Spell out the consequences of not meeting deadlines.

Tell employees how important their work is and what kind of trouble they could put their division in if the project isn't completed on time. This makes the deadline more concrete to someone who thinks that they can always squeeze out a little more time. Remember that it's more advantageous, at least early in the game, to focus on why completing the project on time is important for the division and not what professional "tragedy" could befall the employee if the deadline is missed.

4. Rely on feedback. Check in with employees when they meet their deadlines. Do it consistently and let them know how they are doing. Encouragement always helps. However, a timely discussion when the project seems to be falling behind is just as important.

5. Remember that it doesn't have to be perfect. It just needs to be done. Most likely, no one expects to receive the Nobel Prize at the conclusion of any project. Supervisors should let their employees know that everyone has their abilities – and their limitations. While some things do need to be perfect (account balances, medication dosages, design schematics and the like), if most projects are 80 percent great and 20 percent good, it's probably just fine. Remember that something is called average because that is about as well as the *majority* of people can do it.

Finally, when nothing seems to be working – for you or employee, Dr. Yuen has what she calls the "in case of procrastination, break glass and pull lever" tip. When feedback, reward, or punishment fails to prevent procrastination on a project, ask what you (or the employee) can get done in the next 15 minutes – and then do it. Anyone can stand to do anything for 15 minutes. And for the surprising short amount of time it is, you can get something done. So, don't put off thinking about procrastination. Just do it!

Sources:

Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It, by Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen (Contributor). Perseus Publishing; Reissue Edition. October 1990.

The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play, by Neil A Fiore. J.P. Tarcher/Penguin Putnam. 1989.

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